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EDUCATION IN THE VIRGIN ISLANDS

By

ARTHUR E. LINDBORG

Director of Education for the Virgin Islands

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EDUCATION IN THE VIRGIN ISLANDS

By Arthur E. Lindborg
Director of Education for the Virgin Islands

The Virgin Islands have a total area of approximately 133 square miles. This area is less than twice the area of the District of Columbia. The population is approximately 22,000. There are 50 islands in the group, 4 of which are inhabited. Formal education was started in 1697 by Lutheran ministers. Reading classes for Negro slaves were established in 1733 by Moravian Missionaries. The slaves were emancipated in 1848. Free schools were established by 1850. From 1852 to 1918 education was compulsory for all children between the ages of 6 and 13. With very few exceptions all the natives can qualify as literate.

At the time of transfer from Danish to American sovereignty (1917) the major stress in educational work was academic. Needlework and elementary woodwork were included in the curriculum but were taught in less than half of the established schools. The method of classifying and segregating pupils into groups was based upon the English "Lancastrian" system.

Since 1917 the schools have been reorganized on American standards of classification. The 6–3–3 plan of gradation is used. The first 6 grades are known as elementary, the next 3, junior high, and the last 3 as senior high.

Education is compulsory between the ages of 6 and 15. Foreign-born children are required to pay a tuition of $1 per month on the island of St. Thomas. Fines not to exceed 5 cents per day may be levied by the school director against parents and guardians of children who may be absent or tardy. This method of fines is an old custom put into force by the Danish Government

The amount of money spent for educational purposes has always been large when compared with that of other island groups in the West Indies. During the Danish period the money came from fines, rentals, interest from special funds, and special appropriations. A school tax, such as is known in the United States, has never existed in the Virgin Islands. Local revenues supplemented by grants from the Congress of the United States are pooled and defray the cost of all government activities. The paternal aid from Congress for the past 10 years has been greater in money value than the aid received from Denmark for the past 100 years. This will explain the fact that the governmental expenditures increased from $21,100 in 1910–11 to $102,373 1929–30—expressed in Danish West Indian dollars.

The average cost per pupil in 1910–11 is estimated as $9.30; in 1929–30 it was $33.44, also in Danish West Indian currency. The total revenues for 1929–30 were francs 791,417.82½ and the sum spent for education during the same period was francs 511,867.35.

The population has been decreasing each year. The official census for 1917 gave the group 26,051 inhabitants. The last census (1930) shows 22,012 people. The public-school enrollment has, however, remained practically the same since 1922. Emigration usually affects the adult first and the children later. It is a general practice for mothers and fathers to emigrate and leave their children in the Virgin Islands in the custody of their godparents or some relative with the promise that they will send for them later.

With few exceptions classes are not large. One hundred and thirteen teachers are employed with an average class of 27 pupils each. The teachers' salaries are low as measured by standards in continental United States, but they have been increasing, due to raising the standards for license to teach. Less than 20 years ago the head master of a communal (urban) school received $45 a month for his services. To-day the same position pays a salary of $120 per month. Twenty years ago the assistant teachers, working on full time, received as little as $4 per month for their services. The same type of teacher to-day begins with a minimum salary of $20 per month.

The attendance of children who are over school age (15 years) is large compared with that of a decade ago. The reason rests largely with the increased faith in the value of education for life pursuits. Several adults are taking one or two subjects in the junior or senior high school for short and irregular periods to satisfy personal needs. Adults and ex-students are encouraged to join needlework and woodworking classes at any time during the school year as special students. Joiners are permitted to use the manual-training shop to cut and prepare pieces that could not very well be done by hand in their own shop; no charge is made for this service.

Although local needs determine largely the work offered in the public schools, every effort is made to classify the work accomplished in terms and units common throughout the United States. This practice enables any child in the elementary school or student in the high school to transfer to a similar school in the United States without loss of standing in school subjects.

Three school nurses are employed on full time. They spend the morning hours visiting classrooms. The afternoons are spent looking up children reported absent. The nurse gives advice and service in the home and notifies the medical authorities of any case that needs treatment in the local hospital. This method reduces truancy to a minimum. The American Red Cross representative supervises the

work of the school nurses free of cost to the Government. All children are given a thorough physical examination each year. The records are kept by the school nurse. There are two school dentists employed on half time. They give free treatment and advice to the children selected by the school nurse. The doctors are always available for emergency cases. With few exceptions, all medical supplies and hospitalization and minor operations are free of charge to the children of natives. Children whose parents are in business or possess property are charged a small fee for this service.

Four teachers devote their full time to teaching vocal music in the public schools. They go from school to school. Orchestras have been established, and music week is one of the major community festivals of the year.

Classes in home hygiene and care of the sick are conducted each year by the Red Cross representative in our high schools. Certificates are given to those who satisfactorily complete the work.

School gardens have been conducted with considerable success in which at least half of the children enrolled do some work. One year vegetables were shipped to the New York market in order that the children might have experience in the art of finding a profitable market outside of their community. During the year 1926–27 "Sea Island" cotton was grown in all of the school gardens. The problems of planting, cultivation, protection against boll weevil, picking, ginning, and selling were solved by the pupils. The net profit for the year was $360.61. Chickens are raised with success in districts where the school garden was a failure. Apiaries have been a success in the smaller schools. Some form of manual training is compulsory for all students attending the junior or senior high schools. Special classes are started from time to time in basketry and hat weaving. Formal classes in sewing and woodwork begin with the fifth grade.

Two summer schools have been held for the purpose of giving advanced professional training to the teachers in service and to prospective candidates for teaching positions.

The school year covers a period of 39 weeks of 5 days each, with an average length of 192 days, exclusive of all holidays. The school day is 6 hours long in the urban districts and 5 hours long in the rural communities. All schools follow the same course of study and are supervised, maintained, and supported from one central office. There are no school districts nor school boards such as are common to the school systems in the United States. There is a school board for each municipality whose powers are advisory and who are authorized to hear complaints from either patrons or teachers.

Tables 1, 2, and 3 show certain statistical information concerning the enrollment and age by grades of the children in the schools of the islands.

TABLE 1.—*Enrollment by grades and total teachers employed, 1918–19 to 1929–30*

Year	Enrollment by grades														Total teachers employed
														Total	
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16
1929–30	596	522	471	543	339	270	158	99	45	13	5	0	0	3,061	113
1928–29	639	538	517	457	323	236	132	65	33	10	0	0	0	2,950	114
1927–28	689	468	516	424	300	292	128	57	34	11	0	0	0	2,919	116
1926–27	763	505	490	403	379	243	93	56	30	0	0	0	121	3,083	112
1925–26	709	446	454	475	403	348	146	78	36	6	6	0	0	3,107	113
1924–25	652	438	507	478	135	304	147	72	42	17	10	0	59	3,161	120
1923–24	606	440	528	465	525	287	140	68	42	17	2	3	0	3,153	118
1922–23	652	502	548	538	404	297	118	53	43	14	5	0	0	3,174	115
1921–22	665	429	612	488	347	229	111	56	26	15	0	0	0	2,977	107
1920–21	641	743	513	334	200	93	92	28	22	5	0	0	0	2,671	91
1919–20	997	441	280	260	236	85	31	35	0	0	0	0	0	2,365	78
1918–19	(1)	(1)	(1)	(1)	(1)	(1)	(1)	(1)	(1)	(1)	(1)	(1)	(1)	2,267	81

[1] No record of classification was kept.

TABLE 2.—*Number of children attending school who are over school age (15 years)*

Grade	Number of children attending school			Grade	Number of children attending school		
	St. Thomas	St. Croix	Total		St. Thomas	St. Croix	Total
1	2	3	4	1	2	3	4
I	0	0	0	VIII	41	32	73
II	0	0	0	IX	20	21	41
III	2	5	7	X	13	0	13
IV	9	10	19	XI	5	0	5
V	14	53	67				
VI	31	47	78	Total	164	210	374
VII	29	42	71				

TABLE 3.—*Average age of pupils and number of years in school, by grades*

Grade	Average age of pupils				Average number of years in school			
	St. Thomas		St. Croix		St. Thomas		St. Croix	
1	2		3		4		5	
	Yrs.	*Mos.*	*Yrs.*	*Mos.*	*Yrs.*	*Mos.*	*Yrs.*	*Mos.*
I	7	8	7	8	1	3	1	4
II	8	9	8	10	2	4	2	2
III	9	3	10	5	3	5	3	5
IV	12	4	12	3	5	1	5	0
V	13	2	13	6	5	9	6	2
VI	13	10	14	6	6	5	7	1
VII	14	3	15	2	7	1	7	1
VIII	15	2	15	7	7	10	8	2
IX	15	8	16	7	8	10	9	1
X	16	6	----	----	9	7	----	----
XI	16	8	----	----	10	2	----	----

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